Fostering Unity in Diversity: An Intentional Approach to Mission and Ministry in Africa

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ABSTRACT—Fostering unity in mission and ministry in the African milieu poses a huge challenge. This is because the African continent is a melting pot of diverse cultures, each patently aware of the need to preserve its identity. When the Western missionaries penetrated the continent with the gospel a century or two ago they came with a gospel dressed in Western garbs. Thus Christianity was perceived by many as a foreign religion. Today, however, the gospel has, to some extent, been "indigenized", boasting of much local content. But unity in the church in Africa is not yet a fait accompli. The unity of the church is still assailed by prejudice, tribal sentiments and power struggles. Mission has been stalled in some places while ministry is hampered in others because of these narrow interests. Cultural diversity is not necessarily divisive. When the church recognizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers, diversity may indeed provide the tapestry for unity that will enable her fulfill the gospel mandate. For this to happen, the church must be willing to shun cultural or tribal elitism and embrace the gospel of reconciliation. Keywords: Church, Unity, Diversity, Mission, Ministry, Africa, Holy Spirit.

I. Introduction

The aphorism, "United we stand, divided we fall" perhaps finds its deepest meaning in the context of the church and its mission. Right from its inception the church has been assailed on all fronts by the

adversary; but the most deadly of the attacks seems to have been launched on its unity. This is not surprising. The church united is a formidable force which the gates of hell cannot prevail. White (1942) made this point very clear: "Union is strength, division is weakness. When those who believe in present truth are united they exert a telling influence" (p. 236).

Since the seed of disunity was sown in heaven by the adversary (Rev 12:7-8), it has grown rank with noxious roots on earth, doing monumental damages to families, societies, and church institutions. Thus human relationships and communities have been characterized by dissensions, acrimony and schisms. Unfortunately, church institutions are hardest hit by the salvo of disunity fired by the adversary (Rev 12:17). Even though the church may indeed appear to be heading toward the precipice, propelled by the gale of disunity, the reassuring news is that the church "does not fall. It remains, while the sinners in Zion will be sifted out--the chaff separated from the precious wheat" (White, 1986, p.380).

The cosmic dimension to the forces militating against unity in the church only reveals the complexity and diversified nature of the problem. At the human level there is the challenge of cultural diversification. Racial and tribal differences have been used as fodder to stoke the embers of disunity. What can the church do to stem the tide of divisiveness, especially in the African milieu, where mission and ministry are sometimes carried out under the dictates of tribal sentiments? How can these primordial instincts be curtailed so that mission and ministry are not hampered? Or is church unity an elusive concept that defies any solution?

II. The Church Conceptualized

The concept of the church means different things to different people. Derived from the Greek word *ekklesia,* the term originally connotes the idea of "a calling out"; the people of God, the community and body of Christ (Clowney, 1998, p.140). But in the secular Greek the term is used to signify "a gathering of the people, such as a regularly summoned political body, or an assemblage, generally"(Horn, 1960. p. 224). The LXX rendition of *ekklesia* has strong linguistic and textual connections with the Hebrew *qahal* (IKings 8:14, 22; I Chr. 13:2 etc). This has been used as "gathering", "congregation", "assembly" in the New Testament usage of the term (Horn, 1960. p.224). At least six usages of the term *ekklesia* have been identified in the New Testament (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe,*

2006, p.165). These include: (1) Believers assembled for worship in a specific place (I Cor. 11:18; 14:19,28); (2) Believers living in a certain locality (I Cor. 16:1; Gal 1:2; I Thess. 2:14); (3) A group of believers in the home of an individual (I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phil 2); (4) A group of congregation in a given geographical area (Acts 9:31); (5) The whole body of believers throughout the world (Matt 16:18; I Cor. 10:32; 12:28; cf. Eph 4:11-16); (6) The whole faithful creation in heaven and on earth (Eph 1:20-22; cf. Phil 2:9-11).

It is pertinent to observe, as pointed out by Rice (1985), that the term "church" in its New Testament usage never refers to a building or one branch of Christianity as opposed to another (p.185). Denominationalism or sectarianism is a new development and is foreign to the biblical concept of a "church". Early Christian congregations generally met in private homes (Rice, 1985, p.185). Archeological and historical evidence seems to corroborate this view (Jemison, 1959, p.334). Given that the church, in the New Testament understanding of the term, is not a building or denomination, how can one understand its nature?

III. The Nature of the Church

The Bible employs certain metaphors or symbols in describing the nature of the church. These metaphors will obviously illuminate the understanding of the concept of the church and its unity. The church has been variously described with the use of such metaphoric expressions as "body", that is, the body of Christ (Eph 2:16; I Cor. 12:13; Eph 5:23, etc); "temple of God" or "God's building", where Jesus is its foundation and "Chief Cornerstone" (I Cor. 3:9-16; Eph 2:20). The temple metaphor stresses the holiness of the local congregation as well as that of the global church (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe,* 2006, pp.167-170). The church may also be described as a bride. Both Prophets Hosea and Jeremiah poignantly employ this metaphor in their prophecies: "I will betroth you to Me forever; yes I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in righteousness and mercy" (Hos 2:19, KJV); "I am married to you" (Jer 3:14). One can also see this imagery employed in Pauline epistles to describe the church (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph 5:25). Other metaphors used for the church include: "Jerusalem above"; "the church as a family"; "pillar and foundation of truth" and "the church as army" (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe,* 2006, pp.167-170). Of all the metaphors employed to describe the church, two are of particular relevance to the present concern: the church as a body and as a family. Attention

will be focused on these two aspects of the church nature in subsequent sections, as they impinge on one's understanding of church unity.

IV. Church Unity

The well-known expression, "Unity in Diversity", which has become a cliché in some quarters, helpful as it is, does not, according to Walter Douglass, express enough by itself (Douglas, 1995, p.5). There is a missing dimension. Unity cannot be achieved in diversity unless the church authentically experience and demonstrate that unity in Christ (Douglas, 1995, p.5). This insightful clarification is very important and should not be glossed over. Using Paul's metaphor of the body in the context of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12), it becomes easy to understand how believers from diverse background and orientations can relate together as one body. This was the case in the early church. Melbourne (2008) has perceptively pointed out in his comments on Acts 13:1-3:

> We know that Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew; Saul, of course, came from Tarsus, another city that was not part of Israel proper. Manaen was either a good friend or foster-brother of Herod Antipas. Simeon was called *Niger*, the Latin word for "black." Lucius hailed from Cyrene in North Africa. This means that the leadership of the church was ethnically diverse, with some of the leaders not being Jews at all (p.74).

V. Unity is not Uniformity

It is important to note that the body metaphor used by Paul demonstrates that unity does not mean uniformity. The gospel was not meant to destroy or subsume cultural differences. Where this is done the gospel is hamstrung and loses its authenticity (Bahemuka, 1989, p.7). Unfortunately, some of the early missionaries, who brought the gospel to the African continent lost sight of this and attempted to achieve unity through uniformity. But that was a mistake. Perhaps without putting it into words missionaries, according to Oshitelu (2002), were saying to "African people 'believe in Jesus Christ and be like us'" (p.102). And whether they understood it or not Africans who became Christians have also become very much like

missionaries - that is, westernized" (Oshitelu, 2002, p.102). In a thought-provoking article, "Meeting the Challenges of Diversity", Richard Marker wrote in tandem: "People can spend years in a foreign mission field and still not know the rudiments of how to relate cross-culturally. After a life-time in diverse or cross-cultural situations, some may continue to make the most elementary relational mistakes as they interact with persons ethnically different from themselves" (Marker, 2000, p.19). One perceptive writer put it this way: they may think it their duty to make every Christian just like themselves. But such a plan of work has a human imprimatur, not divine (White, 1970, p.98). In the end they only succeeded in preaching a "foreign Christ to Africans" (Behemuka, 1989, p.7).

VI. Manifestations of Discordant Diversity

Discordant diversity can be manifested in different ways. These manifestations are discordant because they tend to create cracks and fissures in the fabric of unity. Among the divisive elements the following stand out clearly:

A. "Party Spirit":

At the very root of every divisive tendency and manifestation in the church is carnality. When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth he laid bare the trouble with the fledgling church. Without mincing words, he pointed out that the Corinthian church was "yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men" (I Cor. 3:3,KJV). They evinced party spirit, grouping into factions. While some considered Paul as their champion, others lined up for Apollos (verse 4). Paul's question: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13) may indeed imply whether Christ had become a property that could be parceled among the warring factions in the Corinthian church. Such spirit is divisive and thus destructive to the cohesion and harmony that should naturally prevail among believers. Abogunrin's (1991) comments are instructive: "Devotion to human leaders and philosophical ideas may suggest that they do not possess Christ. Though Christ is not divided, the Corinthians were behaving as if He was" (p. 38). He concludes by pointing out that "Christ is one and the church which is His body cannot be divided" (p.38).

Party spirit in the church has its own hidden dangers, if not checked. It could easily lead to hero-worship or personality cult

which has in turn been responsible for several splinters. Perhaps more than any other continent, Africa has witnessed massive proliferation of churches. Sects and denominations mushroom everywhere with leaders who make exaggerated claims for themselves or are so regarded by their followers (Abugunrin, 1991, p.46). It is not uncommon to find the religious leaders adorning their names with ecclesiastical titles such as: The Most Reverend, Superior Elder, Senior Apostle/Prophet, Father (or Mother) in Israel. In such a milieu, where religious leaders are striving to be noticed or the followership are busy stoking the embers of hero-worship, true unity becomes a casualty. The Adventist church in Africa may not have been infected by the virus of hero-worship but that perhaps cannot be said of party spirit which is equally disruptive to church unity.

B. Ethnocentrism

As an offshoot of egocentrism, ethnocentrism is a barrier to unity. It mars the tapestry of "unity in diversity" because of the discordant thread it introduces. Simply put, ethnocentrism is the belief that one's culture or people are superior to others (*Collins English Dictionary,* 2000, sv. Ethnocenticism). Many of the missionaries to Africa during the colonial era unwittingly fell into this fallacy. They thought it was their duty, not only to preach the gospel but to supplant the "inferior" culture of the natives with a "superior" one. Of course, in such a milieu, unity was only cosmetic – its reality was a mirage. Ethnocentrism is symptomatic to human nature. The point made by Smith (1996) is corroborative: "The natural reaction to the differences of others is to judge their customs and ways as odd and inferior and the church worker is not immune to this ethnocentric fundamentalism"(p.19). There is wisdom in the counsel given by Francis Libberman when he was sending his missionaries to Africa. He cautioned them against destroying African values:

> As you do your work of evangelization in Africa respect the people's tradition and values. Do not judge them according to what you are accustomed to in Europe. Strip yourselves of Europe, of its morals, its philosophy. Make yourselves black with the indigenous people in order to form them as they ought to be formed with Christian brotherhood and not in the European fashion. Remember to leave for them what is proper to them (cited in Behemuka, 1989, p.7).

Unfortunately, assigning value judgment to customs and traditions

often serves as a basis for setting religious rules and standards which could sometimes be applied as "test of faith". Such elevation of cultural ethos undermines faith and is indeed destructive to unity. It may then be seen that when Christianity is transmitted in a manner depicted above it forecloses dialogue and understanding and does not touch the soul and life of the people. Consequently, it has little to do with man's salvation. It must be admitted that "developing relationships with people of other cultures takes a long time, and negotiating relational waters that are filled with eddies and undertows can be tricky" (Moreau, et. al., 2004, p.233). But it is possible. Thus if the missionary is to make positive impacts he must show disinterested love to all. John Wesley, writing on *Genuine Christianity* says, a Christian is "full of love to his neighbor; of universal love; not confine to one sect or one party; not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions or in outward modes of worship; or to those who are allied to him by blood, or recommended by nearness of place" (Wesley, 1986, p.12).

Today, in Africa and perhaps in some other parts of the world, missionary activities have experienced a lull. Does this mean that the problem of ethnocentrism has become a thing of the past? Of course not. It has only transformed into home-grown tribalism which ranks as one of the most divisive factors in African Christianity. The ugly spectacle one is confronted with is that in many churches in Africa today offices are often filled not on the basis of spiritual quality, ability and merit, but on the basis of ethnic consideration. There is also the question of ethnic balancing. This means that if church leader A is from a certain tribe, church leader B must be from another tribe, regardless of qualifications and merit (Abugunrin, 1991, 34). This situation where ethnic or tribal considerations override spiritual qualifications for an office, will likely breed mediocrity, strife and discontent. Unity can hardly blossom in such an environment.

A point that should not be glossed over is the Rwandan conflict. The Rwandan genocide of 1994, resulting in the killing of about 800,000 Tutsis and Hutus, revealed something alarming: Christian faith has not set down deep enough roots in Africa to overcome tribalism. Maykuth (2006), commenting on the massacre, observe that:

> The horrifying vision of servants of God abandoning their vows and joining in wholesale slaughter is one of the most haunting memories of the genocide. The churches of Rwanda, where three-fourths of the population is Christian,

have been devastated by accusations that some pastors ultimately were more devoted to ethnicity than to Christianity.

C. Prejudice

White (1980) identified prejudice as one of the myriads of evil that Satan plants in the heart (p.196). If this poisonous plant is allowed to grow it is bound to "kill out the precious fruits of love and defile the soul" (p.196). There is no surer way for a group's self-destruction, more than for its members to be jaundiced. Their judgment becomes distorted because they see through lenses colored by primordial, institutional biases. The Jewish leaders rejected Christ because of prejudice. He did not fall into the mould of a Messiah that they expected. He taught and acted in a manner quite incongruous to their expectations.

The encounter of the Samaritan woman with Christ (see John 4:5 ff) is illustrative of how prejudice can stand in the way of the gospel. The Jews and Samaritans had erected an impenetrable wall of partition against themselves, unwilling to build any bridge of reconciliation. The pent-up prejudice, dammed for years in the heart of the Samaritan woman, found expression when Jesus asked her for a cup of water. She responded: "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (John 4:9). Unfortunately, this prejudice still reared up its ugly head during the apostolic time. Peter would not consider the Gentiles as worthy partakers of the blessings of the gospel. It took a special divine intervention in his encounter with Cornelius to remove the entrenched prejudice (Acts 10:1ff). It is quite interesting to note, according to Douglas (1997), that "up to that point it had been a customary belief, indeed for some, a theological conviction, that the Holy Spirit was an ethnic spirit – Jewish"(p.7).

Peter later learnt the important lesson that humanity has been redeemed by Christ and all Jews and Gentiles have access to the cleansing that comes with the atonement. Impurity caused by sin separates people from Christ (Isa 59:2); not physical or racial differences. God "does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34), and He does not distinguish between persons on the basis of outward appearances, social rank, wealth, and race mean nothing to Him (Kisau, 2006, p.1319). He reckons only with a transformed character that reflects His. Is prejudice still manifested in the church today? Are there some classes of people who are treated with contempt, no matter how nuanced, because of their racial background or economic and social status? Can the church legitimately hope to attain true

unity if she allows the cancerous growth of prejudice to exist?

VII. The Holy Spirit and Church Unity

As one of his favorite quotations, James A. Cress has this to say: "I have not heard recently of committee business adjourned because those present were still awaiting the arrival of the Spirit of God. I have known projects abandoned for the lack of funds but not for the lack of the gifts of the Spirit. Provided the human resources are adequate, we take the spiritual for granted" (Cress, 1996, p.29).

This is precisely where the problem lies; why is the church of the 21st century still riddled with schisms, threatening to break her into smithereens? The church has taken the Holy Spirit for granted, as though she can get by without His unifying presence. Nothing short of the consolidating presence of the Holy Spirit can bring together in harmonious relationship, discrete individuals with varied background, biases and predilections. It is the Spirit that enables believers to transcend human prejudices of culture, race, color, nationality and status (Nichol, 1980, p.175). The incidence on the day of Pentecost is illuminating.

VIII. The Experience of Pentecost

Soon after the crucifixion, the disciples Jesus left behind cut an image of pity: disappointed, discouraged, and dithering on the brink of despair. When Jesus resurrected three days later, He gave this promise: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). They needed a special impartation of the Holy Spirit to fulfill the mission of evangelizing the world. They needed power, they needed to be united. They knew that unity was essential to the church and that without it the church would fail to accomplish its mission. Thus on the day of Pentecost they were gathered in "one accord" (Acts 2:1). Even though textual evidence does not include the term "accord", it is implied (Nichol, 1980, p.134). The disciples had made deliberate effort to eschew jealousy, position-seeking and pride. These were obstacles that could effectively block the influence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Without coming together in "one accord", the Holy Spirit cannot be manifested. A point that must be stressed is that whatever, interferes with unity among believers constitutes an

obstacle that obstructs the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot work in an atmosphere of disunity. Where the Holy Spirit is lacking some believers have attempted to simulate His presence by adopting a form of worship that titillates the senses. White comments: "There will be shouting and dancing with clapping. The senses of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions. And this is called the moving of the Holy Spirit…   The Holy Spirit never reveals itself in such method"(White, 1942, p.36).

Underneath such mimicking of the Holy Spirit presence is deep-rooted carnality that manifests itself in hatred, jealousy, backbiting, power struggles and other forms of divisive tendencies. It is important to note that attaining unity in the church is not simply a matter of emotion; it is allowing Christ to reign in the heart. It is crucifying the carnal nature with its spiritual egocentrism and self-sufficiency.

The unity that the disciples attained on the day of Pentecost was concretized when the Holy Spirit descended upon them. It was said of them that "all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). The result of such Holy Spirit inspired unity was immediate: three thousand souls were added to the church that same day while the "Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (verses 41, 47).

IX. The Role of Spiritual Gifts

One of the marvels of the Holy Spirit in the administration of the body of Christ is revealed in spiritual gifts. Each member of Christ's body is given one or more gifts which are different from others (I Pet. 4:10). But it takes the power of the Holy Spirit to make such gifts complementary and unifying. Rather than being divisive, spiritual gifts were discerned for the purpose of uniting the saints (O'Donovan, 1996, pp.140-141). The role of Spiritual gifts is discussed extensively in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 12). It is obvious from the passage that God's intention for dispensing spiritual gifts is for the church to grow and function properly. Hence an analogy is drawn between spiritual gifts and parts of the human body. No part is useless; each is both necessary and important for the proper functioning of the body. By implication, each Christian is both necessary and important for the proper functioning of the local church (Wagner, 1979, p.50). Indeed, the spiritual gifts were the strength of the early church. Every member was free to use his particular gift in a constructive, edifying manner. But the Corinthian congregation had degenerated into motley collection of disorderly groups, each trying

to demonstrate the superiority of its spiritual gifts. The party with the gift of tongues saw itself as superior to all others. This was a sorry situation which engendered strife and disorderliness, rather than unity.

It was a gross abuse of the office of the Holy Spirit to use spiritual gifts for self-glorification. They were not given for the purpose of satisfying the greed of individuals or to bolster up their ego, but for the common good of all believers. Although a man who possesses a spiritual gift may be profited thereby, the focus, however, should be on the edification of the body of Christ. Paul summarized his discourse on spiritual gifts by showing the "more excellent way" (I Cor. 12:31), which is love. Spiritual gifts can actually become a disservice if their exercise is not moderated by love. Without the cementing agent of Holy Spirit inspired love, spiritual gifts can become a veritable cause for strife, vainglory and egocentrism. Though it may be difficult to demonstrate love in all circumstances, it is the only path to victory. Richard Wurmbrand, who bore the scars of torture and suffering in a communist prison, learnt this important lesson. He writes: "Only love can change the communists…hatred blinds. Hitler was an anti-communist, but one who hated. Therefore, instead of conquering them, he helped them to win one third of the world"(Wurmbrand, 1989, p.62). That is why the "the salvation of mankind and the world's destiny lie in the practical message of the love of God who loves us in Christ Jesus while we were still weak sinners" (Abugunrin, 1991, p.149).

X. Church Unity and its Implications for Missions

Pfandl (1999) rightly observes that "Christian unity has become the focus of most Christian churches today"(p.184). Perhaps the reason for this emphasis may not be unconnected with its implications for missions. It is rather surprising that the progress recorded in the evangelization of the world in the 19th century has been stalled in the 20th century; by 1900 the percentage of Christians in the world was 34 and today Christians are still about one third of the world's population (Pfandl, 1999, p.184). Could it be that because the body of Christ is divided that it has not been able to make significant progress in evangelizing the world? Or because mission is no longer popular as it was during the time of William Carey, Adoniran Judson, Robert Moffatt, Hudson Taylor who navigated and transverse seas and land in order to carry the gospel to the "uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8,KJV)?

Perhaps, the concept of mission needs to be redefined for the

present time. The world is now a global village. Downing (1996) perceptively observes that "it is no longer necessary to go to foreign lands to find people of other cultures and races. They live next door" (p.6). How should mission then be carried out in such settings?

Despite the apparent lull experienced in Christendom, in the evangelization of the world, the cheery news is that the Seventh-day Adventist church "is growing at an enormous rate of speed" (Goldstein, 2006, p.61). With an excess of 15 million members as at the year 2008 (*Yearbook*, 2009, p.4) who are a potpourri of different culture, race, socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, the church has indeed made exciting advances in soul winning. Granted that she is doing wonderfully well in soul winning, is she equally making rapid progress in giving meaning to the life of every member of the church? Are some not feeling that the "church just does not feel like home" (Smith, 1996, p.18)? Do they not feel a tinge of estrangement in the church they belong—too often leading to backslidings and apostasies? With a world population exceeding 6 billion and a church membership of about 15 million is she really making "exciting advances in soul winning"? More importantly, would the Church's mission-driven efforts not be more rewarding if a deeper level of unity is achieved? In order to squarely face these challenges the following imperatives should be given close attention.

A. Imbibe Christ-like Forbearance

There is the need to cultivate Christ-like forbearance. Perhaps there will never be a time on this side of our existence when every person must view things the same way. To insist on identity of opinions on inconsequential matters is a sure recipe for disunity. White underscored this point when she wrote: "the church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement… Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christ-like forbearance (White, 1993, p.266). In which case the basic ingredient for unity does not consist everyone seeing things the same light but having Christ-like forbearance.

There are issues that bother the church in Africa: should women cover (veil) their head in the church? What kind of musical instruments are permissible in church settings? What kind of attire should be considered appropriate for pulpit ministration? Though general principles may be derived from Scripture on issues of this nature, they do not totally free the believer from controversies. Here, the church should be more accommodating and inclusive. After all,

issues of this nature probably have to do more with preference or are culturally conditioned. Thus in order to foster unity more leeway should be given to people to express themselves in ways that are within the confines of gospel liberty. This is not undermining the gospel but recognizing the individuality of members of the church and the right to express themselves in ways that reflect their peculiar apprehension of certain facets of reality. In doing so, the word of God still serves as a guide as well as the arbiter in specific controversial cases.

B. Encourage Cultural Egalitarianism

If mission is to attain its God-ordained purpose, there must be a paradigm shift in inter-cultural relationships. The attitude that one local culture has the only possible interpretation of reality and thus imposes itself as the standard for others should be jettisoned, so that unity may blossom. There is the need for mutual respect and the realization that each person, and of course each culture has equal status before God because of Christ (Norman, 1998, p.26). Walls (2005) may have underscored the need for cultural egalitarianism by stating that "Christianity in Africa cannot be treated as a colonial leftover" (p.91). Indeed, it should not be consigned to the margins of Christian thought. This does not mean turning a blind eye to the seamy side of the cultural values of a particular society or people. Where culture contradicts the expressed will of God it must give way to the more enlightened way. One may need to point out that the "Golden Rule" (Matt 7:12) perhaps, above all others, applies more meaningfully on the arena of inter-cultural relationship (Marker, 2000, p.21). Mission cannot make positive impact when a particular group of people begins to judge the ways of others as odd, inferior or primitive. In whatever guise this attitude is manifested, it provides the fodder to stoke the fire of disunity.

C. Contextualize the Gospel

The impact mission can make on a given culture may properly be gauged by the extent the missioner is prepared to contextualize the gospel. African theologians have often accused the Western missionaries of preaching a foreign Christ to Africa, because the gospel was dressed in Western garbs (Bahemuka, 1989, p.7). The missionaries of course made great sacrifices to plant the gospel on African soil (even at times to the point of sacrificing their lives), but the gospel was not preached in the context, language and symbols,

similar to the African culture. African culture may be conceived as the sum total of African experience. It embraces beliefs, myths, symbols, rituals, arts and language. For the gospel to be truly meaningful to the African, he must be able to view Christ as an African and in a context familiar to him. Such understanding is not divisive, but would firm up faith that is an important ingredient for unity. It is salutary to note that in the last General Conference session (2005), the world church voted the inclusion of an additional belief, "Growing in Christ", which is a reflection of a major concern for the African believer (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe,* 2006, p.149). Demonism, witchcraft, superstition are phenomena which the African believer is daily confronted with. He considers them realities that impinge on his life and destiny. Hence, if the church is silent about it, he would often resort to other places when faced with challenging situations. Donovan (1995) rightly observes that for a great many people in Africa, including some weak Christians, the fear of witches and witchcraft is perhaps the greatest single fear in their lives (p.311). Kefa Sempangi writing on the plight of Christians during the despotic reign of Idi Amin in Uganda, revealed elements of syncretism among some of the believers when Christianity is not home-grown. He stated that "men and women of the bush mixed their faith in Jesus Christ with the practice of witchcraft. They visited the pastor of their church on Sunday, but on Monday they went to see the with-doctor. It was the witch-doctor they trusted with the affairs of everyday life. He is the one who arranged their marriages, who settled their quarrels and guaranteed their harvest" (Sempangi, 1979, p.83). Thus, it is not enough for the missionary to acknowledge the existence of supernatural demonic powers that daily influence the lives of those he is seeking to win to Christ. He must seek to deal with these spiritual realities in ways that are both biblical and practical. This involves leading the victims of demonic oppression to a saving relationship with Christ.

In cases of demonic possession, the demon may need to be exorcized. In doing this the missioner may need to enlist the support of others, especially of matured believers who are well acquainted with the realities of spiritual warfare. A note of caution: one is not advocating deliverance ministries that have recently been in vogue in the West Africa sub-region. Nigeria, for example, boasts of so many of such quasi-gospel ministries that focus almost exclusively on casting out of demons. Such fascination with demons may actually not answer to the Gospel mandate. It could easily lead to a situation where soul salvation is put at abeyance to physical and psychic release. At any rate contextualizing the gospel will not only make it

sensitive to the peculiar challenges facing the believer but will invest it with authenticity and meaning, which of course, is a basic plank in the framework of church unity.

D. Emphasize the Gospel of Reconciliation

Paul sounded clear and loud when he wrote: Christ has "committed to us the gospel of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). Once, believers were at enmity with God and with one another; but in Christ they have been reconciled, first to God and then to one another.

The idea of organizing local congregations on the basis of ethnic isolation or identity is foreign to the ministry of reconciliation, committed to the church by Christ. Indeed, such "ethnic exclusivism is an insult to the reconciling genius of the gospel" (Sarli, 1996, p.5). Should churches be organized along tribal or ethnic lines, wherein is the reconciling power of the gospel? Unfortunately pockets of this exclusion may be found in many parts of the Christianized world. In Nigeria, for example, there are some churches whose membership is constituted along Yoruba, Ibo or Hausa ethnic lines, all in the same locality. Such an arrangement is a sure recipe for intentional fragmentation of the church. Whatever merits may be found in ethnic congregations within a given milieu, they contain seeds of discontent and divisiveness, which in the long run weakens the cohesiveness of Christ's body.

The question that may arise is: how can the gospel be contextualized in a cosmopolitan church setting and have the churches organized along heterogeneous lines? Sarli (1996) seems to provide the answer by pointing to the church in Antioch. Even though it was made up of people from different ethnic origins, the body of Jesus emerged there under the name "Christian" (p.5). It was a multi-cultural church yet it was bounded together in unity. Granted that running a multicultural congregation is a challenge to ministry, the experience of the church at Antioch provides a motive for mission. The Christian mission actually began at Antioch (Sarli, 1996, p.5). Its diversity, rather than limiting and disrupting, was a propelling force that ignited the missionary zeal that lighted the early Christian centuries with the gospel torch. The experience of the church at Antioch could be replicated if African churches (nay, churches the world over) would be more inclusive and reconciliatory in their approach to ministry and mission. Fortunately, for many cosmopolitan churches in Africa, the challenge is hardly that of language barrier; there is a *lingua franca* which could be employed by these churches to communicate the Gospel message. The gains

that may accrue from Churches organized along ethnic affiliations are perhaps not sufficient to counterbalance the huge loss in terms of unity of believers. The Church should, therefore, be intentional in consolidating initiatives that bind and unify, rather than those that tend to accentuate ethnic differences.

XI. Conclusion

The quest for unity in the church could easily lead to misleading tracks. As noted by Clowney (1992), the ecumenical movement, for example, seeks "unity but refuses to exclude those who deny apostolic doctrine. The Evangelicals cling to New Testament doctrine, but often ignore its requirements for the purity and unity of the church" (p.292). It is also possible to err on the side of unity by promoting uniformity at the expense of our human uniqueness and distinctiveness. Hence, erring on the side of diversity, on the other hand, "magnifies differences at the expense of our commonly shared humanity" (Rosado, 1996, p.22). Central to discussions on unity and the challenges of diversity is the heterogeneous nature of African culture. As the church intensifies its mandate for missions more cultural boundaries are crossed, giving rise to daunting challenges on how ministry should be carried out. Two extreme views on how Christianity must relate to culture have been pointed out: one is that culture can be expanded and developed without Christianity, and the other is that Christianity should not concern itself with the preservation of culture (Blanco, 1994, p.108). These bi-polar views do little to douse the tension between Christianity and culture. The tension can not be wished away by an avoidance of culture. Nor is it possible to commit oneself to Christ and isolate oneself from the surrounding culture. Rather, the "dialogue between gospel and cultures must intensify, with the church finding and implementing the best means of reaching people for Christ" (Vyhmeister, 1990, p.10). It may be difficult for humans to understand themselves, but being genuinely inclusive is the inevitable imperative. Ministry and mission should be carried out in a context where there is respect for diversity while working for unity. There is this existential truth one must not forget: God has "made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). This implies that there is no room for "party spirit", prejudice, ethnocentrism or any other form of segregation in the church. It is foreign to the common heritage of all believers whom Christ died for, that "He might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the word, that He might present to

Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle or any such thing, that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:25-27).

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